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Reagan is expected to nominate former CIA deputy for U.N. post

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan has decided to nominate Vernon A. Walters, a former deputy director of the CIA, as ambassador to the United Nations, but he is still considering whether the post should have the same cabinet rank that departing Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick holds. White House sources said yesterday.

"Walters will take it either way — with or without cabinet rank," one White House official said of Walters, 68, a retired general who now is chief diplomatic trouble-shooter for the State Department with the title of ambassador-at-large.

An aide to Walters said the ambassador was traveling out of the country and could not be reached for comment.

The White House official said Walters' boss, Secretary of State George P. Shultz, had urged the President to downgrade the U.N. post so that the new ambassador would not be able to challenge Shultz's foreign policy positions at the cabinet level, as Kirkpatrick frequently has done.

Kirkpatrick, a Democrat who has won a following among Reagan conservatives because of her strong anti-communist views, ended months of

speculation about her future by announcing after a private session with Reagan on Wednesday that she would return to teaching and writing at Georgetown University.

According to U.S. officials at the United Nations, 12 of the 16 U.S. ambassadors — including every one who has served in the last 20 years — either held cabinet rank or was allowed to attend cabinet meetings without the official rank.

Walters, who has spent nearly all of his career working behind the

scenes on delicate diplomatic missions, was a trusted aide to former President Richard M. Nixon and a close associate of Alexander M. Haig Jr., who was deputy to Henry A. Kissinger during the Nixon administration. Haig, who preceded Shultz as Reagan's secretary of state, brought Walters into the State Department as his chief trouble-shooter.

Walters, fluent in more than five languages, has been a translator for high-level diplomats and for presidents, including Dwight D. Eisenhower and Nixon. In April 1972, he became the second-ranking official at the CIA, a post he held until July 1976, when he retired.

His CIA tenure came in the midst of the Watergate scandal. It was he who visited L. Patrick Gray 3d, then the FBI director, and, in effect, tried to wave the FBI off the Watergate investigation by warning that the case might expose CIA assets in Mexico.

Walters later wrote that he knew of no CIA assets being compromised but acted at the behest of White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman because "it simply did not occur to me that the chief of staff to the president might be asking me to do something that was illegal or wrong."